



Coping Strategies for Grief during the Holidays

No simple guidelines exist that will take away the hurt you are feeling. We hope, however, the following suggestions will help you better cope with your grief during this joyful, yet painful, time of the year. As you read through this, remember that by being tolerant and compassionate with yourself, you will continue to heal.

Love Does Not End With Death

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief—a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights and smells trigger memories of the one you love who has died.

Decide what you can handle comfortably and let family and friends know.

Do What Is Right for *You* During the Holidays: Well-meaning friends and family often try to prescribe what is good for you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what you want to do.

Discuss your wishes with a caring, trusted friend. Talking about these wishes will help you clarify what it is you want to do during the holidays. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.

Re-examine your priorities

Greeting cards

Holiday baking

Decorating

Putting up a tree

Social gatherings

Family dinners, etc. Do I really enjoy doing this? Is this a task that can be shared or altered?

Make some changes

Open presents Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning.

Vary the timing of gift giving.

Have dinner at a different time or place.

Let the children take over decorating the house, the tree, baking and food preparation, etc.

Try doing something special for yourself or someone else.

Donate a gift in the memory of your loved one.
Donate money you would have spent on your loved one as a gift to charity.
Adopt a needy family for the holidays.
Invite a guest (foreign student, senior citizen) to share festivities.
Give yourself a treat, such as a manicure, new hair style, day at the spa.
Consider taking an extra day off from work during the season.

Recognize your loved one's presence in the family.

Burn a special candle to quietly include your loved one.
Hang a stocking for your loved one in which people can put notes with their thoughts or feelings.
Listen to music or watch movies especially liked by the deceased.
Look at and display photographs.

Embrace Your Treasure of Memories

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. And holidays always make you think about times past. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your family and friends.

Memories are often tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, smile. If your memories bring sadness, then it's all right to cry. Memories that were made in love-no one can ever take them away from you.

Include the person's name in your holiday conversation. If you are able to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part of your life.

Plan ahead:

If you decide to do holiday shopping, make a list ahead of time and keep it handy for a good day, or shop through a catalogue.

Plan ahead for family gatherings. Decide which family traditions you want to continue and which new ones you would like to begin.

If doing greeting cards, have some with you as you are out during the day – do a little at a time.
Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate activities, rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off guard can create feelings of panic, fear and anxiety during the time of the year when your feelings of grief are already heightened. As you make your plans, however, *leave room to change them if you feel it is appropriate.*

Try to get enough rest

Be Tolerant of Your Physical and Psychological Limits

Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. Your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. And lower your own expectations about being at your peak during the holiday season.

You may already feel stressed, so don't overextend yourself. Avoid isolating yourself, but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. Realize also that merely "keeping busy" won't distract you from your grief, but may actually increase stress and postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.

Express your emotions.

The need for support is often greater during holidays; don't be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won't make the pain go away and talking about it openly often makes you feel better. Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow you to talk openly about your feelings. Find those persons who encourage you to be yourself and accept your feelings-both happy and sad. It will make you feel more understood.

Spend time thinking about the meaning & purpose of your life. The death of someone loved created opportunities for taking inventory of your life- past, present & future. The combination of a holiday & a loss naturally results in looking inward & assessing your individual situation. Make the best use of this time to define the positive things in life that surround you.

Express Your Faith

During the holidays, you may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs. Associate with people who understand and respect your need to talk about these beliefs. If your faith is important, you may want to attend a holiday service or special religious ceremony.

Keep in mind:

Most people find that the anticipation of the holidays is painful than that the experience once the days arrive. Most people do come to enjoy the holidays again. There will be other holiday seasons to celebrate.

Don't be afraid to have fun. Laughter and joy are not disrespectful. Give yourself and your family members permission to celebrate and take pleasure in the holidays.

You will also want to periodically remember other family members, especially children and their varying needs during this time.

Death

You must be truthful, open and caring. It is important to allow them to go through the painful but therapeutic process of grief. You must answer their questions and help them to confront reality.

- You must accept that it's not easy to talk about death.
- You should be prepared for resistance from others.
- Your children need to know:

Why you are sad

Why others are sad

Why they are sad

- Children must be told that it is the death that has made you sad. Without an explanation, they may think your sadness is caused by something they did or didn't do. Start by saying:

"This is a very, very sad time..."

"A very, very sad thing has happened..."

"Mommy and daddy are sad because..."

- Explain that dead means that:

A person's body has stopped working and won't work anymore.

The body won't do any of the things it used to do: it won't talk, walk, move, see, or hear; none of the parts work.

The person won't feel any of the feelings he or she used to feel, such as sad, mad, happy, hurt, hot or cold.

The person will not eat, drink, or go to the bathroom anymore

- How/why the death occurred:

Old Age

"When a person gets very, very, very old, his body wears out and stops working..." We must explain the difference between very, very old and over 20.

Terminal Illness (cancer etc.)

"Because the disease couldn't be stopped, the person got very, very sick; his body wore out and stopped working..." Children may need an explanation about the difference between "very, very sick and just sick." It's important to distinguish fatal illness from just being sick. "It's not like when your stomach hurts, or when Mommy gets a cold..."

Accident

"A terrible thing happened (car crash, etc.;;) his body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working..."

Miscarriage

"Sometimes when is a baby is just starting to grow, something happens that makes it stop. We don't know what it was; it wasn't anything anyone did..."

Stillborn

"Sometimes something makes a baby die before it is born. We're not sure why, but it's nothing anybody did or didn't do..."

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)

"Sometimes with little babies something makes their bodies stop working. It's nothing anybody did or forgot to do. Doctors are not sure why it happens..."

Suicide--Absolute (when there is not doubt the person killed himself)

"Some people's bodies get sick and just don't work right; and sometimes a person's mind doesn't work right. They can't see things clearly and they feel the only way to solve their problems is to take their lives--to kill themselves. However, this is never a solution to problems; they only reason they thought of it is that they weren't thinking very clearly..."

Suicide--Questionable

"Sometimes people take pills to relax or to sleep. Sometimes they forget how many they took and think they need more. These pills make a person's body slow down. Too many of them make the body stop working. We don't think the person wanted to die, but that's what happened..."

Homicide

"Sometimes very bad people do a very bad thing..."

- Refer back to your explanation when answering questions that arise, such as:

Will Grandpa every move again? (No, his body has stopped working.)

Why can't they fix him? (Once the body stops working, it can't start again.)

Why is he cold? (The body only stays warm when it's working, like ours.)

Why isn't he moving? (He can't move because his body isn't working any more.)

When will he come back? (He won't. People who die don't come back.)

Is he sleeping? (No. When we sleep our body is still working, just resting.)

Can he hear me? (His body can only hear if it was working. His body stopped working.)

Can he eat after he's buried? (No, a person eats only when his body is working.)

- Children will connect events that don't belong connected or have difficulty accepting the finality of death:

Children may think that death is reversible. E.T. came back from the dead; also Jesus and Lazarus. The coyote on the Roadrunner cartoon program gets right back up again.

Does this mean someone else is going to die?

I caused daddy to die because I was mad at him before he left for work and then he had the car accident.

Grandpa died from a headache; Mommy says she has a headache too...

Old people die; Daddy is very old; Daddy may die too.

Will I die when I go to sleep?